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Linguistic Holism with Special Reference to Donald Davidson

1. Introduction

Since at least the Middle Ages the theorists have tried to solve the problem of meaning by introducing a pair of terms, *intension* and *extension*.[1] The terms refer to the two aspects of linguistic meaning, extension being the actual entities referred to, and intension expressing "the way they are picked out" (Allwood, Anderson, Dahl 1977: 5). This was the approach used, for example, by Frege, who defined linguistic meaning in atomistic concepts. In contrast, one of the current trends is not to divide meaning into two but to combine its elements and to think of it instead as a concept with simply one dimension. This is how the holistic approach of Donald Davidson deals with meaning. He aims at a purely extensional definition of meaning, claiming that intensions are something a plausible meaning theory simply cannot solve.

An essential aspect of meaning is its social character. Since language is used in communication between people, the meanings conveyed in it must be common to all people. This condition is also accepted by Davidson (1984: 235) who maintains that "[t]he semantic features of language are public features." Some philosophers, however, cannot accept Davidson's theorizing, claiming that a holistic meaning theory cannot view meaning as a shared phenomenon because the holistic nature of the theory makes it

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[1] The terminology has varied; Frege refers, respectively, to *sense* and *reference,* while Russell refers to *meaning* and *denotation,* and Davidson to *meaning* and *reference.*

impossible to portray meaning as anything but private (Dummett 1975: 18). In this paper I will maintain that holistic meaning can, and in fact must, be common to all people if we want to explain linguistic meaning on its basis.

An essential dichotomy that I will pay attention to is that between subjectivism and objectivism, which has served as a kind of watershed between two schools of thought in modern linguistics. On the face of it, Davidson's theory, with its endeavour to apply formal logics to the explanation of meaning, induces objectivist interpretation, but I do not accept this approach. Rather, the background assumptions of the theory appeal to a subjectivist interpretation which takes each language as the frame of reference on which the meaning is based. Without this precondition the theory cannot arrive at an insightful conclusion as regards the meanings of natural language. It must, however, be pointed out that Davidson himself might not agree with this completely.

The main body of this essay is dedicated to a discussion of Davidson's theory of meaning, but as a starter I will provide a cursory reading of the central issues of atomism and holism. To make my discussion relevant to different linguistic theories, I will at times point out how the holistic approach relates to the theoretical assumptions of structuralism and cognitive semantics. Despite the underlying similarities there are differences which I think should be realized. With these differences in mind it should be possible to combine the approaches in a way that will provide us with a better understanding of what linguistic meaning is all about.

2. Atomism and Holism

Atomism and holism grasp reality from almost opposite angles. While atomism places its emphasis on individual facts and objects, holism takes as its starting point the totality which they constitute. According to atomism, a change in any one entity affects only that particular entity and none of the others. To arrive at larger entities

one need only chain together the individual facts and objects. Holism, on the other hand, claims that a change in any single component always affects at least some of the other elements in the integrated whole as well, and therefore any entity consisting of more than one element is more than simply a combination of its elements.

An illuminating summary of holistic ideas has been provided by BonJour (1985: 364–8), although he terms the approach a coherence theory. BonJour's main argument is that a theory is coherent when all the beliefs included in it are related to one another in a specific way, termed *probabilistic consistency*. Probabilistic consistency presupposes that, in addition to the system not containing conflicting beliefs, there must be "some sort of positive connection among the beliefs in question" (BonJour 1985: 366). These connections are called *inference relations* and they relate beliefs to one another in such a way that any single one of them will justify the next. In other words, the beliefs entail one another. Possible anomalous propositions must be inferentially connected to the rest of the system and, if this cannot be done, coherence may be enhanced by devising a system of new concepts, which provide a better consistency for the totality. The more that beliefs entail each another, the more will the holistic coherence of the whole system be increased.

As far as language is concerned, atomism claims that the most important meaning-bearing units are individual words, the meanings of which can be defined exactly. The meaning of larger units, e.g., clauses and sentences, is deduced by simply adding the meanings of each word together. Many atomists also share the objectivist assumption that there is a causal relationship between the words of a language and the objects in the external world and that the meaning of language is strongly based on that relationship.

According to the holistic view of language, meaning is based on the totality of which the meaningful elements of language form part. As Putnam (1988: 9–11) points out, this idea has two consequences: (1) unambiguous once-and-for-all fixed definitions

of most individual words and terms are impossible, and (2) even the non-fixed meanings of the single meaning-bearing elements vary according to any changes in the totality. Linguistic meaning is intrinsic in a language, and the connection between a language and the physical world is very ambiguous, to say the least.

Two famous atomists—although very different from each other—are Frege and Russell. Frege's (1892: 42) view is that all individual words have both a *reference* [Bedeutung] in the external world and an abstract *meaning* [Sinn] which may differ even between two words with the same reference. Each word has its own definition. The idea is presented in figure 1, below.

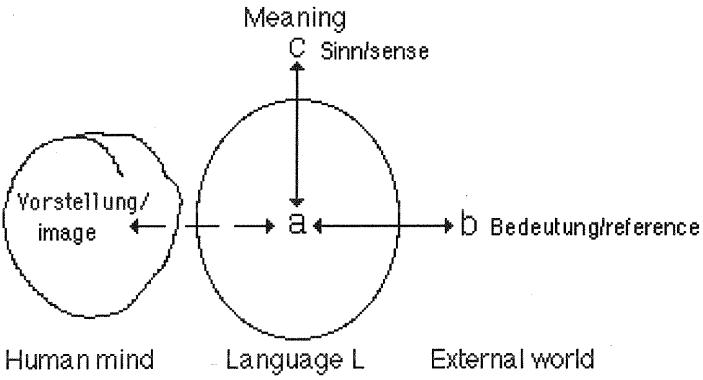

Figure 1. Frege's division of linguistic meaning. Sinn and Bedeutung are often linked together, but the figure above emphasizes the duality contained in the division. The third level of meaning, Vorstellung, signifies the image which the word creates in the mind of each individual. Since this is not public, it is excluded by Frege from his theory of meaning.

Russell (1905: 205–6), on the other hand, claims that there is, in fact, nothing as ambiguous as the sense of a word. The names and expressions simply refer to facts and objects in the world. This in its turn makes atomism a very straightforward and conrete theory, but deprives it of the possibility of referring to unreal objects such

as "the round square" or "the present King of France." Russell's idea is presented in figure 2, below.

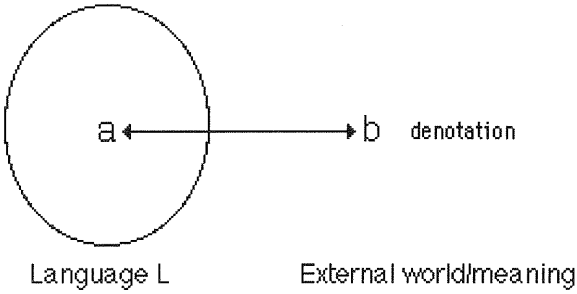

Figure 2. Russell's concept of linguistic meaning. Meaning equals objects and facts in the external world, nothing else.

An example of linguistic holism is Quine's concept of language which derives from his theory of knowledge (see Quine 1953). Quine maintains that, just as the different statements in the sciences are related to each other, so too are the different statements in a language, and when one is studying linguistic meaning one has to consider the network-like totality formed by all of the sentences of a language. Hence, linguistic meaning is internal to each language and, as Quine (1990: 58) claims, "understanding a word consists in knowing how to use it in sentences."[2]

Quine views language as a network-like construction attached to the world at its edges through observation sentences, the meaning of which can be learned by ostension. From observation sentences one proceeds towards the center of the network, where there are expressions that cannot be understood without understanding the meaning of a number of other expressions. As an example Quine gives the word *bachelor*. To know what *bachelor*

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[2] This view is similar to that represented by Wittgenstein (1953: 43) when he claims that "the meaning of a word is its use in the language." See also Wittgenstein's (1953: 66-7) characterization of *family resemblances*.

means one has to be familiar with several other concepts. Furthermore, there are different kinds of *bachelors*, such as *unmarried men* or *bachelors of arts*. This creates a certain indeterminacy in the words at the edges of the network as well, and signifies that in the end there are no pure observation sentences. Understanding is always founded on vagueness. Quine's idea of language is presented in figure 3, below.

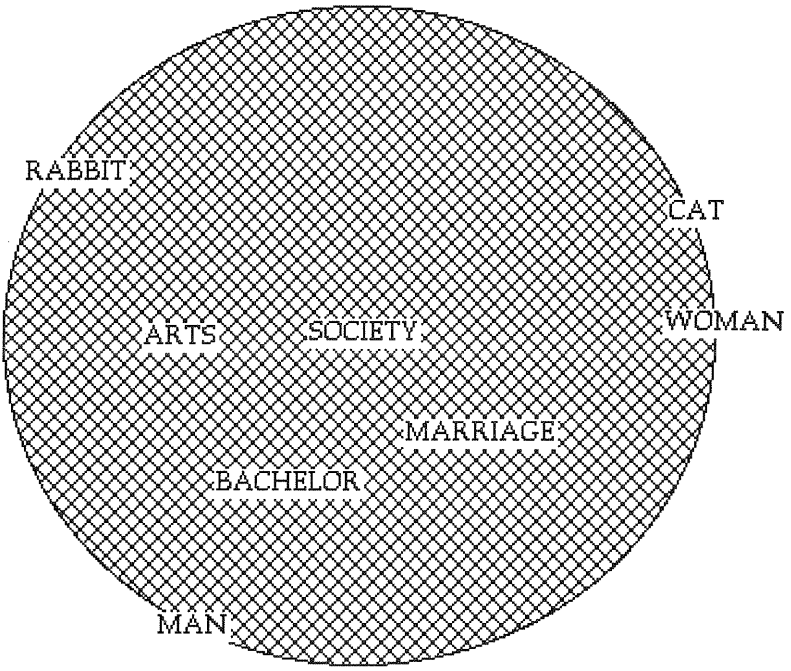

Figure 3. Quine's idea of a network-like language.

The network-like structure that constitutes meaning is familiar to structuralism as well. As de Saussure maintains, linguistic signs have both a syntagmatic and a paradigmatic dimension which relate them to other linguistic signs in a linear and associative fashion. This reminds of the multilayered and multidimensional

network that holism insists on. According to holism, the Saussurean syntagmatic relations illustrate the dimension of language that links the parts to the whole, while the paradigmatic relations point out the links which may be found between the different kinds of *bachelors* in Quine's example. There is difference between the two theories as to how meaning is depicted, but the content of the concept is essentially the same. In fact, de Saussure (1915: 128) sounds almost as if he were delienating holism when he states that language is just like "a machine in which the parts have a reciprocating function even though they are arranged in a single dimension."

In cognitive semantics the definition of meaning is taken a step closer to holistic conceptions, since Langacker (1990: 3) claims that the "meaning of a lexical item must be equated with the entire network, not with any single node." He includes in the network the compositional path of the expression, by which he means the structure that is composed of the different meaning elements that are part of the expression. The holistic conception of meaning is also perceptible in the fact that cognitive grammar does not separate lexicon, morphology and syntax from each other but realizes that they "form a continuum of symbolic units serving to structure conceptual content for expressive purposes" (Langacker 1987: 35). In other words, although structuralism and cognitive semantics both approach language from an empirical and linguistic point of view, their theoretical portrayal of meaning is very close to the way in which it is viewed by holism.

3. Davidson's Holistic Theory of Meaning

There are two basic ideas that underlie Davidson's holistic theory of meaning. The first is the idea that linguistic meaning can be determined by truth conditions, and the second is that language has an inevitably holistic nature.

3.1. Holism and the Theory of Truth

Davidson's theory of meaning is based on the theory of truth. This means that he considers the meaning of linguistic expressions to be equal to their truth conditions. One of Davidson's (1984: 19) basic assumptions is that "to give truth conditions is a way of giving the meaning of a sentence." The idea originally comes from Frege, who is highly valued by Davidson, although he criticizes Frege's idea according to which the reference of a sentence is its truth value. In Davidson's mind the idea is intolerable, since it does not distinguish sentences with different senses from each other as long as they are true. He claims that different sentences must be distinguished, and since this cannot be achieved with the help of reference it must be done with the help of meaning.

It is one of the prerogatives of a linguistic meaning theory that it is able to provide an explanation for all the sentences of a language—including those that have not been encountered before. When an explanation is provided on the basis of a truth theory, it is necessary for the theory to avoid intensionality and for it not to include concepts which have not been defined before. Because meaning is a semantic concept, it is not possible to define it with the help of other—so far undefined—semantic concepts. To avoid intensionality, on the other hand, requires that the formula of meaning cannot be presented in the form of "*s* means *p*" (Davidson 1984: 22), since the predicate *means that* is sensitive to the intensionality of the terms in the sentence. Evnine (1991: 77–8) illustrates the problem by means of an example which applies the formula to the sentences "Joan of Arc was born in Orleans" and "The maid of Orleans was born in Orleans." Both include a subject which refers to the same person. When the sentences are placed in the formula, the result, however, is a false statement, since the fact that the reference is the same does not entail that the meaning is the same.

To avoid this problem Davidson rejects intensionality and relates his theory to the theory of truth developed by Tarski,

whose *semantic conception of truth* is purely extensional. This refers to the correspondence that exists between a sentence and a certain situation (Tarski 1933: 155). In Tarski's theory the truth of a sentence can be deduced from a schema named *Convention T*, which states the following equivalence:

(T) X is true if, and only if, p (Tarski 1944: 50).

In this form the letter X stands for the name of any sentence that is being examined and the letter p is that sentence itself. The name of the sentence is usually expressed simply by putting the sentence in quotation marks, but it can also be expressed by some other kind of structural description of the sentence.[3]

Tarski (1944: 54-5) distinguishes between the object language and the metalanguage, the object language being the language that is the subject of the discussion and the metalanguage being the theoretical language that is used to discuss the object language. In order to be able to discuss the object language in terms of the metalanguage, the metalanguage must, of course, be "essentially richer;" it must contain the expressions of the object language, have the possibility of forming the names of the object language sentences, and include the logical terms that are necessary for interpreting the truth of the object language sentences. Despite the object language sentences included in the metalanguage, all the other terms in the metalanguage must be introduced to it by definition. Only then can the metalanguage be used to define the semantic notion of truth in the sentences under study.

Tarski's theory applies to one language at a time and produces differing results when applied to different languages. What Tarski (1944: 51–2) emphasizes is that his theory can only be

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[3] As an example of a structural description of a sentence Tarski (1944: 50) gives the structural description: "snow is white." The sentence is constituted by three words, the first of which consists of the 19th, 14th, 15th, and 23rd letters, the second of the 9th and 19th letters, and the third of the 23rd, 8th, 9th, 20th, and 5th letters of the English alphabet.

applied to formalized languages whose structure is exactly specified. An example of such a language is the language of mathematics and its methodology. At a general level, Tarski (1944: 67–8) believes that his notion of semantic truth is only applicable in practice to very few contexts. Otherwise it mainly provides intellectual satisfaction for those who understand it.

Davidson regards Tarski's theory as much more useful than just providing intellectual satisfaction. It constitutes the basis of his own theory and provides a formula that can be used in almost exactly the same form for his extensional theory of meaning. Davidson's formula is

(T) *s* is *T* if and only if *p* (Davidson 1984: 23).

In this *schema T*, as it is called, *s* represents a structural description of a sentence of language *L* and *p* stands for that sentence itself. The predicate *is T* can be interpreted as *is true*. As I understand it, Davidson's structural description could be any succession of linguistic signs that are used to express the sentence *p* itself. Most often this is the sentence in inverted commas.[4] The sentences that result from applying schema T to single sentences are called *T-sentences*. When we place, for instance, the sentence "snow is white" in schema T, this results in the T-sentence "'Snow is white' is true if and only if snow is white."

It is worth noticing that there are no inverted commas around *s* in the schema. This has two consequences: on the one hand, the role of *s* is similar to that of *p* and, on the other, it is possible to do away with actual reference relations between the two. This eliminates one of the problems usually related to different truth theories. Since *p* and its structural description *s* use the same semantic concepts there is no need to resort to any other

[4] One example of a possible structural description given in relation to Tarski's Convention T may be found in footnote 3. Another example for the same sentence could be /S+N+O+W/+/I+S/+/W+H+I+T+E/.

concepts than those already included in one in order to understand the other. This excludes the ambiguous notion of meaning from the schema and revises the theory to become something which is fruitfully able to tackle the problem of meaning by means of purely logical analysis.

On the face of it, Davidson's schema T may appear a trivial truism which does not provide any new information about the truth of linguistic expressions or their meanings. The schema might also be a truism, if there were no limitations imposed on its application. However, limitations are imposed. The T-sentences offer an alternative possibility for speaking about the truth of the sentences only in strictly determined logico-grammatical circumstances. They are of no help when applied to sentences like, for example: "Every sentence Aristotle spoke was false," or: "What you said last Tuesday was true" (Davidson 1984: 65). This is because the T-sentences only apply to sentences whose logical structure is known exactly, but this is not the case with these sentences. It is just this awareness of the difference between the formal requirements of a truth theory and logic on the one hand, and the ambiguity of natural languages on the other, that is considered by Harrison (1979: 131) to be one of the greatest merits of Davidson's theory. When Davidson sets limitations on the applicability of his T-sentences to a natural language he provides at the same time a goal for his theory, a goal which it has to reach in order to be able to explain the meanings of a language. As Davidson (1984: 56, 59-60) points out, it is possible to explain the meaning of even seemingly ambiguous sentences by basing the explanation on the structure of the sentences so that each sentence is interpreted as being composed of elements drawn from a finite stock. With this in mind, the difference between formal and natural languages is more apparent than real.

Davidson's theory of meaning is similar to Tarski's in the sense that it has to be applied to each language separately. Despite the similarities there are two significant differences between the two theories. First, when Tarski aims his theory at defining the

concept of truth, Davidson goes to the opposite extreme and aims at defining the meaning of linguistic expression. This indicates that the basis of Tarski's theory is founded on the idea that the meaning of sentences under examination is already known as far as their truth is concerned, and it is only on account of this that the semantic truth of the sentences can be defined. Davidson, on the other hand, never requires that the meanings of the sentences should be known in advance—on the contrary, it is those meanings that he is after, and it is the truth he takes for granted.

The second difference lies in the applicability of the theories. While Tarski applies his Convention T only to formalized languages, Davidson intends his T-sentences to be applied specifically to the sentences of natural languages. In practice this has to be done in two stages. The sentences dealt with in the first stage are taken from such "a carefully gerrymandered part of the language" (Davidson 1984: 133) that even Tarski's theory would be able to deal with them. However, they are thought of as "giving the logical form, or deep structure, of all sentences" (Davidson 1984: 133) and so, in the second stage, the remaining more or less ambiguous sentences are matched to them. The result is a complex totality of T-sentences which gives the meaning of all of the sentences of one language.

With these two differences in mind, Davidson's theory can be recognized as more far-reaching than that of Tarski. Instead of being simply a theoretical method of defining a concept of meaning (or truth) in mathematics of formal logic, it provides a frame in which it is possible to tackle the problem of meaning within any human language used for communication.

Davidson's application of formal logics to the definition of meaning distinguishes his theory from the way in which cognitive semantics approaches the question. Langacker (1990: 11) obviously does not think highly of the capacity of truth-conditional semantics for solving the problems of anomalous expressions, but he claims that his method of defining their meanings with the help of compositional paths is a more tenable solution. On the face of

it, this is true, and even Davidson (1984: 35-6) admits that there are several questions his theory has not solved. Nevertheless, if we take his formality not as a traditional way of simply applying logics to independent expressions but relate it to the holistic way of viewing language, we realize that it is not as vulnerable as it seems. The fact that all the expressions of a language, the anomalous ones included, form a totality provides us with, at the least, a theoretical possibility of explaining the meaning of any expression with the help of truth conditions, as I will point out in the next two sections.

3.2. Radical Interpretation

As a means of applying his theory to natural language Davidson offers *radical interpretation*, an extension of truth theory, which attaches the theory empirically to its object of study. The concept derives from the ideas of *radical translation* presented by Quine. To illustrate his ideas Quine (1960: 28-32) outlines a situation where a linguist goes into the jungle to study the language of a people who have had no previous contact with any outsiders. The task is to create a translation manual matching the sentences of jungle language with the sentences of the linguist's own language, English. The problem is that jungle language does not resemble any of the languages the linguist is familiar with, and he cannot base his translations even on the usually helpful common features in the cultural context—hence the name *radical* translation.

The first expression the linguist comes across is a one-word sentence, *Gavagai*, which the jungle people utter when they see a rabbit run by. After careful observation he presumes that it means the same as *Lo, a rabbit* in English. He starts to test it exclaiming *Gavagai* as a stimulus sentence in situations more or less similar to those in which he first observed the sentence himself. On the basis of jungle people's assents and dissents he concludes that *Lo, a rabbit* actually is a suitable translation for *Gavagai*. Of course, he at the same time has to unravel the problem as to which of the

jungle people's reactions are assents and which are dissents. In any case, even if he is able to solve this he can never be absolutely certain what *Gavagai* actually means. It might in fact mean a rabbit's tail or a female rabbit, and he would probably still get the same responses to his stimulus sentences.

As a logical consequence of his ideas Quine concludes that linguistic meaning always bears a degree of indeterminacy, and the meanings of sentences in two different languages never match one another exactly. To emphasize this he goes so far as to claim that if there were two independent English-speaking linguists in the jungle working on the same language they would probably end up with different translation manuals—even to the extent that "each manual might prescribe some translations that the other translator would reject" (Quine 1990: 48). The distinction in the manuals would result from the differences in the radical translators' modes of thinking, opinions and ontologies.

It is important to notice here that Quine does not believe in meaning as an individual entity in the same way as, for example, Frege, who divides meaning into sense and reference, separating both from the actual expressions. According to Quine, the meaning is in the sentence, not in some abstract proposition. Language is all there is and its meanings have to be found in it, not beyond it. The basic idea of Quine's radical translation is presented in figure 4, below.

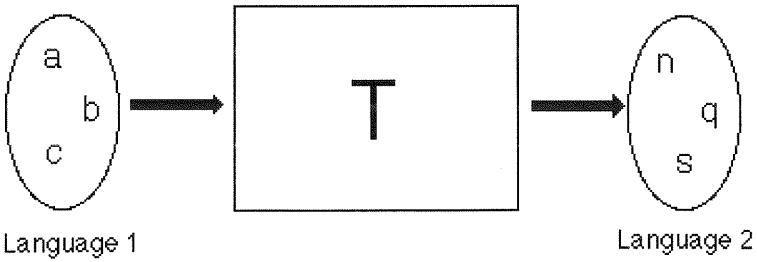

Figure 4. Quine's theory of radical translation portrays two languages as related to each other through a translation manual (which is presented in the figure by T).

Like Quine, Davidson aims at finding the meaning of the sentences of natural language in actual linguistic situations. This means that in his theory the truth of sentences must be dependent on who expresses them, when and in what situation. The truth predicate of a T-sentence is therefore a three-place predicate defining truth as a relation between the statement expressed by sentence *s*, speaker *u* and time *t*" (Davidson 1984: 44). If we also remember that Davidson's theory is language-related it becomes possible to express a T-sentence in the form "sentence *s* is true (in *L*) for speaker *u* at time *t* if and only if *p*" (Davidson 1984: 45–6). For the single sentence "Es regnet" the sentence can be expressed "(T) 'Es regnet' is true-in-German when spoken by *x* at time *t* if and only if it is raining near *x* at *t*" (Davidson 1984: 135).

As its point of departure the theory of radical interpretation takes the uninterpreted utterances of language, since Davidson (1984: 142) points out that they "seem the appropriate evidential base for a theory of meaning." When interpreting them the radical interpreter must have the same attitude to language as Quine's radical translator has. He must act as if he had no previous knowledge of the meanings of its utterances. This is why it does not really matter whether the language is a foreign one or a familiar one.

The problem with radical interpretation is that in addition to the indexicality of language it also links meanings and beliefs to each other as an inseparable pair. In other words, the meaning of the speaker's utterance cannot be explained without bringing in the concept of belief. This means that the theory of radical interpretation must be both a theory of meaning and a theory of belief (Davidson 1984: 142–4). But how can the theory of radical interpretation break into the circle of belief and meaning and then provide an explanation for, at least, the latter one? Davidson's solution is to regard belief as constant and in this way to eliminate its influence on the theory. After all, if we cannot regard the beliefs of the one we are communicating with as "largely consistent and true by our own standards, we have no reason to count

that creature as...saying anything" (Davidson 1984: 137). Now all we have to worry about is the concept of meaning.

The idea that people usually say what is true and believe what they say is termed by Davidson the *principle of charity*. According to this it is possible to presume that people usually believe what other people say to be true as well. Naturally, if we accept the principle of charity we do not have to deny the possibility of people being able to utter sentences that are untrue, or that lies would not exist. It means only that the untrue sentence are not part of what our theory of meaning deals with. Their meaning simply cannot be explained by a theory that bases its foundations on the truth of the sentences.

The idea of the principle of charity derives from Quine, although he does not express it as an exact principle. He also places a few restrictions on applying it to his theory, while Davidson applies his principle to linguistic usage without limitations. He has to do so because it is a necessary requirement for his theory to work.

> Charity is forced on us; whether we like it or not, if we want to understand others, we must count them right in most matters. (Davidson 1984: 197.)

Even though Davidson's radical interpretation has much in common with Quine's theory of radical translation, there are obvious differences between the two. One of the most significant differences lies in the fact that, while Quine seeks for relations and similarities between two languages, Davidson's theory concentrates on surveying the meanings of a single language, emphasizing that each language is a holistically structured network of interrelated meanings connected to each other in a way specific for that particular language. According to Davidson (1984: 129-30), it is much easier to understand the meaning of sentences on the basis of his theory than on the basis of Quine's. Radical translation results only in showing how the object and subject languages relate to each other, which does not necessarily presume that the

sentences of either language are understood. All that is required is that we know that the sentences of two languages produce the same reaction in the native speakers of the languages. Davidson claims that this is not enough. If we want to interpret the sentences in a satisfactory manner, we have to understand them and reveal their semantic structures as well, and this is what Davidson believes his theory succeeds in doing. In its simplicity the principles of Davidson's theory of radical interpretation are presented in figure 5, below.

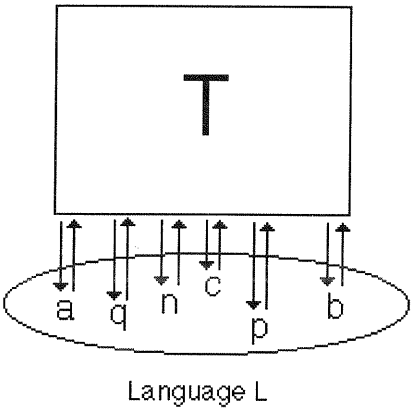

Figure 5. Davidson's theory of radical interpretation. In the figure T represents the T-sentences of the theory. The figure relates to figure 3 above, emphasizing the difference between Quine's theory of radical translation relating two languages and Davidson's theory of radical interpretation dealing with only one language.

3.3. The Prerequisities of Holism

If we want to see Davidson's theory applied to language in practise, it is necessary that we realize that it works only if we accept the holistic view of language. As Davidson (1984: 25-7) points out, his T-sentences cannot provide an adequate explanation for meaning without being thought of as inevitably related to a

network-like holistic structure of meaning relations of a certain language.

A mere formula of the T-sentence, schema T, is not enough to show why the sentence "'Snow is white' is true if and only if snow is white" is true, but the sentence "'Snow is white' is true if and only if grass is green" is not. If we take the mere schema as the basis of explanation, even the latter sentence could be interpreted as logically true if the truth values of the elements in the place of *s* and *p* are equal—and they are so if both elements are true. In the examples above both elements are indeed true, and therefore we have no choice but to conclude that both T-sentences quoted above are true. However, this is an intolerable result since they give different conditions for the sentence *p* to be true, which is a consequence that would—if it were true—do away with all that we have accomplished so far in our pursuit of the mystic meaning. It would imply that the conditions that make a sentence true and reveal its meaning are so various that there is no way of grasping them in a plausible way. By accepting holism we are able to avoid such an intolerable result.

One of the basic requirements of holism is that both *s* and *t* of a T-sentence are explicitly related to each other in the holistic totality of language. Holism, however, does not require that sentence *p* and its structural description *s* should be literally the same, as in the T-sentence "'Snow is white' is true if and only if snow is white". Holism as such could as well produce a T-sentence like "'Snow is white' is true if and only if grass is green". The only requirement that holism sets for the sentence and its structural description is that they are unambiguously related to each other. This means that there is only one T-sentence in relation to each single sentence that is true.

Davidson (1984: 224–5) illustrates this by reminding us of how temperature is measured by using different scales. Fahrenheit and Centigrade give different numerical results for the same temperature. The results are nevertheless related to each other in a specific way: they form a linear transformation of each other and

each degree of Centigrade always corresponds to a certain degree of Fahrenheit. In exactly the same way, the different scales of a truth theory (each related to a different language) produce different meanings. In other words, they match the sentences of each language to their structural descriptions in a different manner. The only requirement is that the match between the sentences and their descriptions is unambiguous; a T-sentence based on holism can produce only a single possible true alternative at a time.

The portrayal of each language as a different scale of measuring temperature brings to mind de Saussure's (1915: 113-7) division of the linguistic sign system into two interdependent dimensions which both to a certain extent have their own inner structure. The signifiers and the signifieds each form a chain, and those chains are in constant movement in relation to each other. This means that each language uses a different scale to divide its semantic reality into meanings, and even within one language this division into meanings changes during the course of time. As regards the basis of relating the signifieds to the corresponding signifiers, the essential factor is the relation between the other signifieds in the chain, i.e. the scale of measurement that is used. As de Saussure (1915: 114) puts it, in language "the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others." This reflects the great similarity in the theoretical approaches of both structuralism and Davidson's holism.

3.4. Holism and Language Learning

If we accept Davidson's theory of meaning we must accept the fact that linguistic meaning is indeterminate. Single T-sentences are not the most important part of the theory; essential, rather, is the holistic totality of T-sentences. This, of course, means that the individual T-sentences are not individual in the traditional sense. They are inevitably connected with each other. Each sentence is composed of elements that are to some extent mutual with other sentences, and it is one of the aims of the theory to indicate these

relations. Single sentences can be interpreted only if at the same time it is possible to interpret several other sentences in the same language. In fact, in relation to Davidson's theory of meaning it is not really possible to talk about the meanings in language in the traditional sense—that is, in the sense that meanings can be defined explicitly and permanently. We could rather say that linguistic interpretation is based on the fact that the meaningful elements of language are holistically related to each other and their interpretation changes while the holistic totality changes—and it changes constantly. The idea of linguistic holism would actually require us to define the term *meaning* in a new way, because the traditional terminology is more or less outdated.

As far as language learning is concerned, the idea of indeterminate meaning might appear superficially inconceivable. It makes us wonder whether we can ever say that a person knows a language. It is doubtful whether anyone is ever able to learn the whole holistic network of a language and know how all the meanings should be interpreted. However, this is true only to a certain extent. It is true that no one can really master fully the meanings of a language, but this does not mean that the network of language cannot be learned at all.

Davidson admits that to know a language is to master a certain kind of linguistic totality. It is not, however, possible to learn, or even to know, a language as mere words and separate bits and pieces, since learning always involves some sort of holistic totality. This view is problematic only for those who consider linguistic meaning atomistically. An example of such a view is Fodor and Lepore's (1992: 9) claim that "I can't understand any of your language unless I can understand practically all of it" which implies that understanding a language is a matter of either/or—you either understand all of it or you do not understand

any of it.[5] Those who have acquired the holistic view realize that this cannot be true. When applied to individual words, it is naturally true. There are always words that one does not know the meaning of. But when the view is applied to a language as a whole—or even part of it, for instance, a two-hundred-word Greek vocabulary for tourists—it is not true. To understand a language is always a matter of degree. It is not necessary to master the whole network of language to able to interpret part of it, or even most of it, while, on the other hand, it is still possible to interpret part of the language completely without mastering the whole of it. Besides, even the fact of familiarity with the whole network of language would not eliminate indeterminacy from the language, because indeterminacy is an inevitable element of linguistic meaning. In fact, what Fodor and Lepore's claim seems to reflect is the atomistic view of language. It represents the view that, when someone knows a language totally, he can place each word in its correct and fixed position in the network of language and then define each word's meaning unambiguously. The holistic view of language cannot accept this kind of reasoning, because it neglects the essential characteristic of language, the indeterminacy of its meanings.

A holist believes that it is possible to interpret language correctly even though one understands only part of it. Nevertheless, our interpretation always depends essentially on the other elements of a language. This is something that we notice when we look at language learning. When a child starts to learn a language, it starts by picking up a few words which it uses more or less casually at first. Little by little it begins to perceive the connections between these and some other words and it is only at this stage we can really say that a child learns a language. The same

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[5] Fodor and Lepore's work is aimed at pointing out the fallacies behind the justifications for meaning holism, it does not advocate atomism as such. In fact, as the authors point out in the preface to the book, one of them is actually inclined to think that meaning holism is a deep and interesting theory.

can be noticed in the learning of a foreign language. In the first stages, when we know a few individual words and are able to tell what might be the more or less corresponding terms in our own language, we cannot plausibly claim that we know the foreign language. But as the learning proceeds we are able to identify the inner structures of the language we study and realize the relations between different expressions. Only then can we little by little consider that we understand the language we are trying to learn. Nevertheless, our understanding is always to some extent indeterminate and it changes as our idea of the whole system of the foreign language develops.

It is also possible to think that a child learns his mother tongue as a sort of holistic totality, which he learns to divide into increasingly narrow categories and concepts as he grows up. The first word the child learns is usually "mama". The word reflects the idea that the child has about the world, since the mother initially represents the whole world to the child; the child is not able to isolate anything else, not even itself, from the mother as a separate entity. Gradually it learns the word "I" and simultaneously starts to conceive of itself as a separate entity. As time passes, the child learns words at an accelerating tempo, and this changes its impression of the world. The world as such or the language as such do not change; it is simply that the child learns how to divide the totality into smaller and smaller parts. The process of language acquisition can be regarded as a holistic process in which the holistic totality preserves its holistic nature but the relations between different expressions are changing constantly.[6]

3.5. A Call for a Subjectivist Interpretation

One of the basic ideas of atomistic theories of meaning was that each word has a referent in the external world and that this

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[6] I am grateful to my fellow researcher, Tapio Korte, for communicating the the essence of this idea informally.

relation connects each word directly to the external world. From a theoretical point of view this approach could be termed a correspondence theory. Davidsonian holism has often been regarded as a correspondence theory because the T-sentences appear superficially to relate each sentence of a certain language to the external world. This view has its origin in the interpretation of Tarski's theory, which has traditionally been considered a correspondence theory. Haack, however, has expressed severe doubts about this. She points out that Tarski himself "does not regard himself as giving a version of the correspondence theory," and although some aspects of his theory are analogous to it, some of them are "neutral between correspondence and other definitions" (Haack 1978: 114). In agreement with Haack, I believe that Tarski's original intentions offer a justification for interpreting his theory as a form of coherence theory. After all, its aim is to relate the names of the sentences of the object language to the actual sentences of that language, and everything that is needed is defined in the metalanguage. There is nothing in the external world that would or even should correspond to the variables of Convention T.

Since Tarski's theory allows itself to be interpreted as a coherence theory, it is even more obvious that Davidson's theory permits that as well. To grasp the meaning of the sentence *p* in schema T requires no other semantic concepts than those already included in *s*—not to mention any entities in the external world. Not once does the theory cross the borderlines of language.

The idea of viewing Davidson's holism as a coherence theory introduces a subjectivist flavour into the interpretation. As opposed to the objectivist view which portrays the external world as existing mind-independently and maintains that it can be referred to in an objective manner, the subjectivist view regards the world as something people already look at, so to speak, through the coloured lenses preshaded by the ideas already

existing in their minds.[7] In relation to language this means that different languages divide reality into entities differently. Davidson (1989: 171) claims that subjectivism, in its classical sense, is untenable. However, he is not actually criticizing the kind of subjectivism which I am about to impose on him, but the strict interpretation of conceptual relativism which denies the possibility of mutual understanding in human communication. As he claims, there must be "limits to how much individual or social systems of thoughts can differ" (Davidson 1989: 159). I accept this, but I also maintain that social systems of thoughts do differ, at least to the extent that languages differ. Instead of regarding subjectivism as being related to our knowledge and beliefs in general, I will regard it as related to language. When we deal with Davidson's theory of meaning, language is something we must take as the basis of our interpretation, since the whole theory takes place in the domain of language. Even more specifically, since it produces different results in the case of each language, we must take each language as the basis of our interpretation separately. This is how I understand Davidson himself to deal with the theory. After all, he reminds us, as a sound subjectivist, that "the truth of a sentence is relative to (among other things) the language to which it belongs" (Davidson 1984: 189). A subjectivist interpretation seems to be the only way to go and this is justified by Davidson's endeavours to keep the external world outside his theory, because he realizes that it is impossible to tackle the problems of linguistic

[7] In Putnam's terminology objectivism and subjectivism are, respectively, externalism and internalism. He also punningly calls objectivism "metaphysical realism" (Putnam 1981, 49).

meaning while at the same time moving in a completely different domain.[8]

Davidson (1984: 216) admits that our tradition seems to suggest that we cannot do without reference when we deal with a truth theory of meaning, because reference seems the most relevant feature when defining the truth of such elements as names and predicates. But if we want to have a plausible theory for explaining meaning, we obviously have to do away with reference, since, as Davidson (1984: 220) maintains, "there is no chance of explaining reference directly in non-linguistic terms." As a solution Davidson suggests that the only way is to accept a holistic theory of meaning and give up the concept of reference altogether. In other words, almost in the same way as belief is held constant in the theory, so too is reference—and with it, truth. It is something that cannot be taken into consideration in explaining meaning in linguistic terms, and therefore the whole concept will have to go. Similarly, the dualism between a conceptual scheme and the world can be disregarded, since, according to Davidson, it simply does not exist.

The subjectivist interpretation which I am offering for Davidson relates his theory to cognitive semantics. It is one of the basic ideas behind the theory of cognitive categories that linguistic meanings are dependent on the language they relate to. For example, the length of a week varies in different cultures, which leads Lakoff (1988: 135) to conclude that the realities we refer to by language "reside in human minds, not in anything 'external.'" Human minds, on the other hand, shape their reality depending on

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[8] I have to admit that Davidson does not always seem to keep the external world outside his theory. At least, it appears so when he writes that "I think truth can be explained by appeal to a relation between language and the world" (Davidson 1984, 37). I would still like to claim that Davidson's theory can be interpreted in a way that does not regard the relation between language and the world as fundamental for meaning. It may be fundamental for truth, but as Davidson's original idea is that the totality of sentences must in any case be true, there is no need to take the relationship into account when searching for the meaning of language.

the language of their carriers. The language, however, is not separated from other human activities, but is part of human cognition, and the meanings found in it are motivated by human psychology. The interpretation we impose on language must perforce be a subjectivist one if we want to arrive at insightful explanation of how meaning is defined in language.

As an example of an incorrect and objectivist interpretation of Davidson's theory is Fodor and Lepore's (1992: 86–7) claim that the theory does not tell what the sentence "It's raining" really means. It could mean that it is raining, but in another world it could mean that the cat is on the mat. I see no problem in this, since, after everything that I have written so far, it is indeed possible that in another world the sentence "It's raining" could mean that the cat is on the mat. One only has to keep in mind that in the language of that world the holistic structure is a completely different one from that of English. In English the sentence "It's raining" relates to its structural description "It's raining" and means that it is raining. Of course, in a world where "It's raining" is related to the structural description "The cat is on the mat" the totality of Davidsonian T-sentences is different from the T-sentences of English, but they can still be used to convey the truth (and the meaning) of the sentences of that language.

As I see it, Fodor and Lepore confuse the aspects of correspondence and coherence theories in their argument; in other words, they give Davidsonian holism an objectivist reading which does not hold. When they are worried about the fact that the sentence "It's raining" does not mean that it's raining, they are thinking that the sentence should correspond to a fact they can observe in the external world. This view interprets Davidson's theory as a form of correspondence theory, which it obviously is not. The theory should be interpreted in terms of a coherence theory, i.e. in a subjectivist way, and when we do that, it does not matter whether the cat is on the mat or whether it is raining in the external world, when we say "It's raining". What matters is that the sentence and its elements are part of a holistic network of

language and relate to each other in a way that makes the sentence true and therefore gives the sentence its meaning.

4. Conclusion

In this paper I have presented some of the central issues behind holism, taking the meaning theory of Donald Davidson as a special example. I do not claim that it would offer a perfect solution to the problems of meaning—not even the theorist himself claims anything like that. On the contrary, Davidson (1984: 35–6) makes it clear that his theory can offer no solution so far to the questions of, for example, the logical form of counterfactual sentences, mass terms and sentences about belief. I also regard it as a flaw of the theory that it does not explain metaphorical meaning. It is not that Davidson would not discuss metaphorical meaning, but the answer he provides does not appeal to me. Although Davidson (1984: 245) admits that metaphors inspire different associations and mental images, he claims that what they really mean is only "what the words, in their most literal interpretation, mean." I see this as a way of escaping the task of explanation by maintaining that the meanings launched by metaphors are not in the domain of the theory. This view distinguishes itself totally from the view encouraged by cognitive semantics and represented by, for example, Lakoff (1987), who is especially interested in metaphors. He thinks that they can offer us valuable information when trying to solve the mystery of linguistic meaning. I would agree. I would also like to expand some of the basic ideas behind Davidson's holism with a combination of ideas from cognitive semantics. My subjectivist interpretation of Davidson's theory is a step in that direction.

I would like to emphasize that the subjectivist view which I have imposed on Davidson's theory in this paper does not call for the acceptance of conceptual relativism. Its subjectivism regards each language as a conceptual scheme of its own and therefore interprets linguistic meaning as something related to each

language, never to a conceptual scheme that would be independent of language. I regard this interpretation to be in accordance with Davidson's (1984: 198) observations that it would be "wrong to announce the glorious news that all mankind—all speakers of language, at least—share a common scheme and ontology" but that the "truth of sentences remains relative to language."

As I see it, there must be some common scheme between individuals in the real world in order to make communication possible and only language can provide for that. Despite the fact that Davidson's theory in the end considers meaning to be something very indeterminate, he never claims that successful communication through language would be impossible. Contrary to Dummett (1975: 18), who claims that holism evidently leads to the thought that a linguistic community cannot exist and that a language is simply understood solipsistically as "something spoken by a single individual at a certain period," Davidson regards it as one of the essential features of language that it is social. Despite the indeterminacy of language its essential characteristic is to act as a common element between most people. As Davidson puts it:

> What no one can, in the nature of the case, figure out from the totality of the relevant evidence cannot be part of meaning. (Davidson 1984: 235.)

All in all, I regard Davidson's theory as an illuminating and encouraging attempt to explain linguistic meaning and I think that part of the criticism which it has received derives from the simple fact that it has been evaluated on the basis of old-fashioned objectivist concepts which do not properly suit the modern holistic portrayal of language. As I see it, a proper interpretation of holism calls for new concepts or, at least, new definitions of some of the old ones. One solution could be to give up the idea of a definable meaning altogether and admit that meanings can never be exactly determined. This would not necessarily have to mean that we should do away with meaning theories in the future, but it should encourage us to develop a new one on the ruins of the traditional

ones. After all, the fact that people more or less succeed in mutual communication provides proof that linguistic meaning has a relatively comprehensible basis which is worth studying.

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